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ABSTRACT

Concerned with the need to stimulate reading pleasure for older adolescents, this document outlines a high school reading unit that capitalizes on the perennial popularity of series books such as Nancy Drew, the Hardy Boys, and Tom Swift. Suggested activities include having students reflect on their personal reading and write a fictional sketch about a favorite author; research a series author to discover the multi-author approach of the series books; compare older versions with newer revised books to uncover sexism, racism, and stereotypes; and discuss stilted dialogue, one dimensional characters, and formula writing. The study of the series books can be extended to include the serial dime novels of the 1800s with their heavy moralizing, poor characterization, and stunted dialogue, or a historical approach to the author Horatio Alger and his rags-to-riches novels set in the later 1800s. (HAI)

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THEY'RE READING THE SERIES BOOKS SO LET'S USE THEM; OR, WHO IS SHAUN CASSIDY?

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

A paper presented at the IRA 1978 Convention in Houston, Texas. This paper was presented as part of a symposium entitled "Adolescent Literature from Tom Swift to I Am the Cheese."

CS004183

THEY'RE READING THE SERIES BOOKS SO LET'S USE THEM: OR, WHO IS SHAUN CASSIDY?

Recently I was in Kansas City for a reading convention. I had a chance to listen to such people as Bill Martin, Jr., Kenneth Goodman, Donald Durrell, Bill Durr, Leo Fay, Ed Fry, Jerry Weiss and the topping on this cake of fine speakers was poet/author/entertainer Maya Angelou. It was, to say the least, an exciting time and a stimulating experience.

On the last day of the convention, I went to breakfast with a friend of mine on the faculty at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. When she let me off back at my hotel, the convention center was simply jammed with thousands of cars and people. Lines of people circled both large convention centers. Obviously, I decided, I must have missed the final reading convention highlight. Maya Angelou had attracted perhaps two thousand people and Bill Martin about the same, but there were tens of thousands of people here now and many were elementary school and junior high school students with their parents. Was it Susie Hinton or Richard Peck I wondered? Was someone about to announce a new readability formula? Was I suppose to be speaking and no one had mentioned it to me?

I entered the lobby of my hotel and saw Maya Angelou and several of the other major speakers get out of the elevator. Is this what everyone had been waiting for? No one even noticed these convention speakers as they quietly stood in line to pay their hotel bills. I couldn't stand it any more so I turned to a particularly intense junior high school student who was leading her mother towards the great throng of people. I directed my question to the girl. "Excuse me. What's going on?" I stammered. She looked directly through me towards

the auditorium and screamed.

"He's in there! Oh, God, he's in there!" People were looking at us and I turned away in embarassment. But then I thought, if indeed this is the second coming, do I want to be caught-turning away in embarassment? My young friend was now crying so I turned to her mother. Luckily she took pity on my ignorance.

"Don't you know?" she said with a mixture of disgust and pity. "Shaun Cassidy's inside. I stood scratching my head as off she was pulled by her dazed, crazed, and crying daughter.

Now I can't imagine that there are those of you who work with youngsters who have not become acquainted with the teenage phenomenon of Shaun Cassidy but if his name doesn't ring a bell, he's the son of the late actor Jack Cassidy and the brother of another teenage superstar, David Cassidy.

At this point some of you may well ask what this has to do with Tom Swift, the series book[illegible]d adolescent reading? Simply, Shaun Cassidy was catapulted to fame with his [illegible]arring role as one of the Hardy Boys in the new TV series seen on Sunday nights, "The Adventures of Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys."

Those of us concerned with what youngsters enjoy reading know that Nancy Drew and Tom Swift and Cherry Ames and Frank and Joe Hardy have very often been an important part in the creation of "lifetime" readers. What is somewhat worrisome to me is that all too many teachers recall with obvious enjoyment their experiences with these books and yet do not allow their own students to read the books because they lack something called "literary merit."

In thinking back on my own reading life, I could wish nothing better for a youngster in my home or classroom than the intense pleasure I experienced in my own reading of the series books in a time in my reading life that has come to be known as the Unconscious Delight stage of reading.

I was a devious reader and a conniving child. In the New England town where I grew up, the local Woolworth's store had an entire corner devoted to the series books. Wednesdays after school meant an afternoon visit to Woolworth's

with a friend. It was no fun going alone because part of the delight was proudly letting your best friend know that you had read volumes 1-17 of the Tom Swift series while he had to confess to only reading 1-7. But the most important part of Wednesday for me was looking at the cover and reading the last page in the next book in the series. In today's reading jargon, this was perhaps my pre-reading exercise without the workbook pages!

Thursday nights my father got paid and our ritual was to go downtown, cash the check, pay some bills, and finally I'd lead him to Woolworth's. Our game was always the same. "There's a really good book over here, Dad."

"Haven't you read all of those yet?" he'd say.

"No, I've got 18 more to go!" This was always said with excess exuberance and a conscious attempt to open my eyes wide and not blink. Was there ever a father who could resist such intellectual curiosity in a son?

"All right," he'd say. "Just remember, young man, money doesn't grow on trees." I heard that message of money and trees through every book in the Tom Swift series.

Once we got home, the book had to be hidden, especially from my mother who came home from her own job about 9 p.m. You see, she cashed her pay check on Friday nights and if she knew that my father had bought a book for me on Thursday night, I'd never get her to buy me one on Friday. We had our own Friday night ritual similar to the one I went through on Thursday. The only difference was that I had her buy me a mystery series that chronicled the adventures of one Tom Quest. It's true, I managed two series at one time. Saturdays I spent on the tell tale scar adventures of Tom Quest and Sundays were for Tom Swift. It never dawned on me that when I placed my two newly read books on the shelf next to the others that my parents might be wise enough to see my collection growing by two books per week instead of one.

I loved that time in my reading life and while I'm not terribly proud of conning my parents (if indeed that's what I did), I am proud that I conned them

out of money for books and not for hula hoops, cigarettes, and Davy Crockett coonskin hats. A literary critic I was reading recently best describes how I felt about this Unconscious Delight stage when she says of her own series book reading that it was like sitting down in a comfortable chair with a bag of hard candy and getting up three years later.

My primary point in relating this story is to get you to remember the Unconscious Delight period in your own reading life. Secondly, to realize that as much as some teachers and some librarians condemn these books, youngsters still read them with enjoyment and total abandon. And my third point in relating my own experience with the series books is to bring us back to Shaun Cassidy.

For a long time, those of us dealing with adolescent readers have realized the effects of media on what teenagers read. Quite simply, when a movie such as M.A.S.H. comes to town, paperback sales of that book go up. One need only look at Joanna McKenzie's "A Survey of Leisure Time Reading of Adolescents" found in the April 1976 Arizona English Bulletin to note the importance of the media on adolescent reading interests. Of the 50 most popular books in grades 7-12, the top title is the Excorcist. Number 2 is Go Ask Alice. Number 4 is Sybil. Number 5 is Brian's Song. Number 6 is The Godfather. Number 7 is Sunshine. Number 10 is Lisa Bright and Dark. In fact, of the top 50 books, 36 of the favored books are also films seen in movie houses or on television.

Keeping this media influence in mind, I trust you will not be surprised when I tell you that because of Shaun Cassidy and the TV show, Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys series books are selling more than ever and the reading audience has been extended both upward into the high school and downward into grades two and three. If you haven't noticed, check your local bookstore. Displays of the series books are highlighted everywhere. In fact, while I'm not sure what I want you to make of this comment, there is now available a series of Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys workbooks to go with the books themselves.

At this point I thought you might be interested in some facts and figures. By 1973, years before the current TV series had come on the air, just the first book in the Hardy Boys series, The Tower Treasure, had sold more than 1,500,000 copies since it first appeared in 1926. In fact, in 1975 alone, still before the current TV show, Hardy Boys books sold 1,670,000 copies in that one year. It is estimated that before the new TV series began, the total number of Nancy Drew books sold was around 60 million copies. Add to that the popularity of the TV series today and you judge for yourself how many of the books are being purchased, borrowed, and read by American youngsters.

Now then, if you will grant me the fact that these series books continue to be read by students, I can begin to tackle the second half of my topic. That is, how can we use these books and build on this obvious reading interest in our classroom? The first suggestion I feel compelled to make is that if you teach in an elementary or junior high classroom where many of the students are actually involved in the Unconscious Delight stage of reading these books, then let them read. I'm sure that part of my love affair with the series books centered around the fun of reading, completing a book, and never being asked to answer comprehension questions or fill in a book report form that ended with that all important question: Would you recommend this book to a friend? Certainly I knew other people my age were reading the books but in that delicious solitude of the back bedroom on Saturday afternoons, I secretly knew that only I could be as clever, as resourceful, as courageous as Tom Swift, Tom Quest, or Frank and Joe Hardy. I'm quite sure that if I had to answer a 25 item fill in the blank test that began with what color was the Hardy boys' father's hair, the total delight of reading those books would have been lost.

The classroom uses I am suggesting are designed for those adolescent readers who have left the stage of avid series book reading. In most adolescent reading interest inventories, youngsters stop mentioning these books at the end of the seventh grade. Therefore, let's consider use or the series books in the high

school.

Anyone who has ever attempted a unit on children's literature in the high school knows that students enjoy looking back at what they read in childhood and they take seriously the job of critically appraising these books. Perhaps the best way to begin with the series books is to give the older adolescents a chance to reflect on their reading life to date. Have they gone through what professionals have labelled the Unconscious Delight stage? If so, what was read? Where? When? When the series books are mentioned, some questions about what elements particularly attracted them to that set of books seem appropriate. This recollection can be followed with a one paragraph assignment in which the youngster is to describe what he thinks the author of his one time favorite series is like. How old is he or she? Where does the author live? Any children? Speculate on hobbies, type of house, type of pet. Most adolescents recall the golden names of those revered authors: Carolyn Keene, Laura Lee Hope, Victor Appleton, and Franklin W. Dixon.

Once these fictional author profiles have been shared, the research begins. Books like Something About the Author reveal to students that the names of Hope, Dixon, Appleton, and Keene and so many more are just that, names and not real people. Quickly they discover that those revered names were made up by someone named Edward Stratemeyer. They learn that there never was an F.W. Dixon or a Laura Lee Hope and that furthermore, many of the books in a series were written by different people and that (bitter as the pill is to swallow) some male writers actually wrote some of the Nancy Drew books.

Further research into the life of Edward Stratemeyer reveals to students something Stratemeyer called his Literary Syndicate. Essentially Stratemeyer found that he had many ideas for series books but not enough time to write each adventure in its entirety. So he developed his fiction factory. When students reach this point, teachers may want to bring Leslie McFarlane's autobiography to their attention. Ghost of the Hardy Boys is, in part, one man's recollection of what is was like to work for the Stratemeyer Syndicate. Since it was 1926

and McFarlane was a struggling newspaper reporter, he decided to answer an ad in the Editor and Publisher trade journal in the hopes of supplementing his meager income. The simple ad read:

EXPERIENCED FICTION WRITER WANTED
TO WORK FROM
PUBLISHER'S OUTLINES

A short time later, McFarlane received a letter from Stratemeyer along with an outline of a series book. It was McFarlane's job to try his hand at writing, or rather filling in, some of the chapters in the book. This is the outline McFarlane received.

> CHAP. 1 - Dave and Bob cruising off Long Island in launch Amos runs into fog - mention first and second volumes of series - engine fails - ring reminds Bob of adventures on Volcano Island - mention other volumes - boys discuss Lem and Bart Hankers, believed dead - sound of foghorn is heard - ocean liner looms out of fog - collision seems inevitable. CHAP. 2 - Ship veers off in nick of time - boys hear warning bell and see lighthouse - fix engine - almost pile up on dangerous reef - night and darkness - searchlight suddenly reveals mass of wreckage dead ahead - lauch crashes into wreckage and catches fire - boys dive into water - boat blows up - Dave looks for Bob. (McFarlane, p. 22)

McFarlane filled in the simple chapter, passed the test, and wrote the first of the Hardy Boys books in 1926 under the Stratemeyer Syndicate name of Franklin W. Dixon. Stratemeyer obviously liked the work of this new writer because after submitting the completed manuscript of The Tower Treasure, McFarlane received an envelope with outlines for two more Hardy Boys books. The envelope from Stratemeyer did not just contain outlines.

> There was also a letter, a check and a document that looked vaguely legal. The document, a contract, was very simple - it covered everything. It was a release form absolving me of any rights to any volumes already written or any that might be written in the future for the Stratemeyer Syndicate. It covered the plots, the titles, the Roy Rockwood name, the name of Franklin W. Dixon and the manuscripts, forever and ever. Furthermore, it included a promise that I would never under any circumstances divulge to anyone the fact that I had ever written a Dave Fearless book or a Hardy Boys book under any title or pen name to anyone.

> The penalty for such a revelation wasn't spelled out. I assumed that it had something to do with boiling in oil. I had no hesitation in signing this document. As a matter of fact, I had been doing a little thinking about the matter. The release saved me the trouble of asking Stratemeyer to do me a similar favor. No sworn affidavits - merely his signature to a promise that he would never tell anyone I ever wrote books for him. (McFarlane, p. 72).

Both teachers and students are interested to find out that the check McFarlane received for writing The Tower Treasure (remember a book that has sold over 1,500,000 copies) was in the amount of $100.

When students find that Edward Stratemeyer died in 1930, questions start to come up about whether or not the books continue to be written, and if so, by whom? Young researchers seem delighted when they uncover the fact that Stratemeyer's daughter, Harriet Adams, took over after her father's death and continues to revise and author new Nancy Drew Books. Mrs. Adams is now 83. Teachers may want to point out to students an interesting article that considers both the inner workings of the Syndicate today as well as the changes that have taken place in the revised versions of the books. The article is Ed Zuckerman's "The Great Hardy Boys' Whodunit" in the September 9, 1976 issue of Rolling Stone.

Zuckerman's article points to another direction classroom teachers can take with the series books. A comparison of the early Nancy Drew books and the newer revised books brings to the forefront discussions about sexism, stereotyping, and racism. Here is just one example from an early Nancy Drew book.

> 'We'll do the best we can for you, Miss,' came the not too comforting response. 'But right now we have only one servant on hand - a colored woman.'
>
> 'Send her out this afternoon,' Nancy ordered in despair 'I must have someone immediately.'
>
> As she opened the door her heart sank within her. It was indeed the colored woman sent by the employment agency, but a more unlikely housekeeper Nancy had never seen. She was dirty and slovenly in appearance and had an unpleasant way of shuffling her feet when she walked.

If there are those students who are especially intrigued with looking at the series books from a feminist viewpoint, teachers would be well advised to

recommend Bobbi Mason's The Girl Sleuth: A Feminist Guide in which the author attempts to view the influence that Nancy Drew, Cherry Ames, and others have had on molding millions of female lives.

On a lighter note, and yet while still comparing old and new versions of the books, you might want to revive the 1950's phenomenon of Tom Swifties in your classroom. Do you remember, "Please pass the sugar," Tom said sweetly? If you need help jarring your memory of Tom Swifties, look at some of the old series books and get a copy of Alvin Schwartz' Witcracks Jokes and Jests from American Folklore. You'll find more examples the likes of:

> "I'll have four hot dogs," said Tom frankly.
> "I'll have two sodas," said Tom cokesingly.
> "Whoops! I've dropped the eggs," Tom cracked. (Schwartz, pp. 54-55)

There are many lessons to be found in a study of these series books. Lessons about stilted dialogue, one dimensional characterization, and formula writing are all possibilities. It doesn't take the average high school student long to catch the formula of an exciting opening chapter with a link to a previous volume and a final chapter with promises of things to come in a future volume and in between a series of chapters that each end with cliffhanger action prodding the reader into the next chapter to find out what happened.

While many high school students enjoy the series book activities discussed so far, I think teachers and students derive even greater enjoyment when they go back further in their research to the days of the dime novel. If you will take one final excursion with me, let's return to the thrilling days of yesteryear and enter the era of Nick Carter, Deadwood Dick, and Rattlesnake Ned. What we begin to do in this strand of the series book unit is to go back and explore the history of the series books and the history of adolescent literature itself.

In an attempt to give students a feeling for what children were supposed to be reading in the early 1800's, I usually ask that they read one of Jacob Abbott's Rollo books. These 28 volumes chronicle the adventures of a New England farm boy as he tours the world with his Uncle George. Students are at once surprised

at how literature for the young has changed and at the same time are appalled at the didactic heavy-handed moralizing of much of this early literature and so they search for more interesting things that adolescents might have read in the 19th century. The literature they find is the literature of the dime novel tradition.

Professionals dealing with adolescents today know that action in a book or story is of primary importance. The same was true for youngsters in the 1860's. The dime novel began as an extension of the westward movement in the United States. Writers began to see the gold mine of adventures tied up with frontier life. In 1860, the publishing house of Beadle and Adams published a paperback novel for a dime. It was entitled Malaeska: The Indian Wife of the White Hunter. This set the stage for hundreds of action packed adventure stories. The books filled a need for entertainment at a cheap price and while the early dime novels were not written for an adolescent market, it does not surprise adolescents to learn that this is what teenagers were reading at the time when their parents were conscientiously buying them Rollo books and Bible stories. Students soon see the beginnings of the current series books format when they discover that the best selling of the dime novels were continued series that followed the adventures of one character from one book to another.

High school students who critically read the old dime novels have little choice but to come away from this reading experience with a greater appreciation for the skills of more talented writers. For the most part, dime novels were poorly written. An appreciation of more subtle characterization can be gained when compared with the simple dime novel characterization exemplified by this excerpt:

> Silas Rogers was a man honest and upright after the fashion of the frontiersmen. He was brave, and had shot two or three in brawls, but he was not regarded as quarrelsome. (Nye, p. 203).

Many students have not considered the differences between well written and poorly written dialogue until they are asked to compare some of the dime novel dialogue

with conversations in other books. Students enjoy searching through the dime novels for examples of dialogue the like of this:

'Are you hurt?'
'Who?'
'You.'
'Me?'
'Yes.'
'No.'
'Oh!' (Nye, p. 204)

Critical high school readers find the poorly written, inflated, dime novel dialogue a source of constant humor. If it's dramatic reading of prose you are looking for in your classroom, you'll find plenty of tongue-in-cheek Sir Laurence Oliviers ready to read Bandit Burling Sharp's dying conversation with Scout Tracy.

> 'Who fired? Who killed me?' cried the dying man. 'Oh, God, it's too late!'
> 'Aye, too late,' cried Harold Tracy. 'I fired the bullet which found your life and I shall never forget the deed!'
> 'Oh had I but one minute more!' groaned the dying wretch, but he did not.
> Not one present but felt as Trapper Ned, that Burling Sharp had met a just doom. (Nye, p. 204)

In addition to frontiersmen and bandits, the dime novel tradition is rich in detective and mystery stories. The 1500 titles in the Nick Carter series point to the popularity of this crime fighter. Do you ask what manner of man was this great detective? Let me quote from one of the Nick Carter books.

> Giants were like children in his grasp. He could fell an ox with one blow of his small, compact fist. Old Sim Carter had made the physical development of his son one of the studies of his life. Only one of the studies, however. Young Nick's mind was stored with knowledge - knowledge of a peculiar sort. His grey eye had, like an Indian's, been trained to take in minutest details fresh for use. His rich full voice could run the gamut of sounds, from an old woman's broken, querulous squeak to the deep, hoarse notes of a burly ruffian. And his handsome face could, in an instant, be distorted into any one of a hundred types of unrecognizable ugliness. He was the master of disguise and could so transform himself so that even old Sim could not recognize him. And his intellect, naturally keen as a razor blade, had been incredibly sharpened by the judicious cultivation of the astute old man. (Nye, p. 208-209)

Students are anxious to update this hero by describing a character they are more familiar with - a character who is "faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful

than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings at a single bound and who, described as Clark Kent, a mild mannered reporter for a great metropolitan newspaper fights a never ending battle for truth, justice, and the American way." This dime novel/comic book connection is certainly an exciting one to consider but one outside the confines of this particular unit.

Invariably during student research into the dime novels, someone discovers that while the dime novels were being read by adolescents, publishing houses were beginning to churn out books specifically for a juvenile market. The discovery brings us face to face with the king of juvenile fiction in the later half of the 1800's - Horatio Alger.

During his lifetime, Alger authored over 120 books. If nothing else, that means that there are enough Alger books around so that everyone in class gets to read one. These rags to riches stories allow a teacher to bring alive that period of American history in which the Alger books are set. Adolescents well indoctrinated into today's world of competition and cynicism are happy to point out the loopholes in the rags to riches Alger plots that take the poor but honest boy from poverty to great wealth. As students read Work and Win or Do and Dare or Sink or Swim or Struggling Upward, it seems to me that it's the teacher's responsibility to give the adolescents a feeling for the Alger times. Millionares were made overnight. Indeed, this was the era of Guggenheim, Carnegie, and Vanderbilt.

Certainly these books were a product of the times in which they were written, and while it behooves both teacher and student to examine the Alger books in this historical light, the real modern day enjoyment comes when one considers the style and writing quality of Alger, the prolific Harvard graduate. Tom Thatcher is a typical Alger character.

> 'Is supper ready, mother? I'm hungry as a bear.' The speaker was a study boy of sixteen, with bright eyes and a smiling, sunburned face. His shirt sleeves were rolled up, displaying a pair of muscular arms. His hands were brown and soiled with

> labor. It was clear that he was no white handed young aristocrat. His clothes alone would have shown that. They were of course, durable cloth, made without any special regard for the prevailing fashion.
> Tom Thatcher, for that was his name, had just come home from the shoe factory, where he was employed ten hours a day pegging shoes, for the lucrative sum of fifty cents a day. I may as well state here he is the hero of my story and I hope that none of my readers will think any the worse of him for working in a shoe shop. Tom, having a mother and a little sister to support, could not choose his employment.'
> (Nye, pp. 63-64)

Contemporary students who read and view so much that is sexually explicit are incredulous when they find that in all the Alger books, there is only one kiss and that further, when Alger did write a book about a girl, he had her fall in love with a very respectable young man but before Alger wrote himself into a dangerous situation, he sent the young man off to Africa as a missionary for thirteen years!

There are two final points I'd like to make on Alger. Students find him an interesting character and often someone will read a biography of this man. I recommend such a step for teachers and students. His life is one filled with incredible saddness and twists of fate similar to the plot lines in his own books. Reading his biography allows both the man behind the books and the historical background of the times to come alive. Secondly, a study of Alger brings the wheel full circle and connects us once again with Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys.

The connection that ties Horatio Alger and the current series books together is Edward Stratemeyer. Stratemeyer had to learn his trade of juvenile series writing from someone and one of those teachers was Alger himself. In fact, when Alger died, Stratemeyer "completed from notes the last eleven to eighteen Alger books." (Donelson, 1977). This Alger/Stratemeyer connection seems to be a classic case of the student learning from the teacher and then becoming far more successful than the teacher.

The topic of success brings me back to Shaun Cassidy. Little does this superstar know that much of his success he owes to the likes of Bandit Burling Sharp, Nick Carter, Deadwood Dick, Rattlesnake Ned, Horatio Alger, Edward Stratemeyer,

and Harriet Adams. All of these real or fictitious people played a major part in the creation of Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys. In turn, these series books have provided many readers with hours and weeks of thoroughly enjoyable reading. For many readers, this Unconscious Delight stage of series book reading taught youngsters the most important lesson of all---there's something exciting to be found between the covers of a book. Perhaps all of us owe these series books and authors a debt of gratitude.

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